FREE SAMPLE

The opening pages of

Harley-Davidson Shovelhead Buyer's Guide

Read these pages exactly as they appear in the full guide.
Nothing here is rewritten or summarised — it is the product itself,
so you can judge the depth before you spend a dollar.

The full guide: https://ironheadguides.com/product/IH-SHOVELHEAD-BUYERS-GUIDE

IronHead — instant PDF download after checkout.

IRONHEAD

BUYING A SHOVELHEAD

The 1966–1984 Harley-Davidson Buyer's Guide

KEY FACTS AT A GLANCE

- **Engine:** 45° OHV V-twin, 1200cc (74ci) 1966–1977; 1340cc (80ci) added 1978
- **Years:** 1966–1984 (replaced the Panhead; replaced by the Evolution)
- **The two motors:** 1966–1969 "generator" Shovel (Panhead-style bottom end); 1970–1984 "cone" Shovel (alternator, redesigned cases)
- **The rough years:** 1969–1981 under AMF ownership — read Chapter 5 before you believe the horror stories or the dismissals
- **What moves the price:** originality of numbers, generator vs. cone, FLH vs. FX, condition of cases
- **Price range (asking prices, September 2026):** ~$3,000 for a rough project to $20,000+ for an excellent original; generator Shovels start around $15,000
- **The one rule:** buy the numbers before you buy the bike

SAMPLE EXCERPT — full guide available at the link on the cover sheet

How to Use This Guide

This is a buyer's guide, not a shop manual. It won't tell you how to rebuild a Shovelhead. It will tell you whether the Shovelhead you're standing in front of is worth the money being asked — and what it'll cost you after you hand the money over.

Read it in order the first time. After that, use it as a checklist: take the inspection chapter to every bike you look at, and don't skip steps because the seller seems like a good guy. Good guys sell bad bikes every day, usually without knowing it.

A note on honesty: the first draft flagged seven facts **[VERIFY]** where I couldn't confirm them against factory literature. They've since been checked against H-D service bulletins, factory model-year literature, factory parts fiches, and Donny Petersen's *Unauthorized Technical Guide* — the corrections are in the text, and every source is listed in the verification appendix at the back. What remains uncertain is labeled as uncertain.

Prices in this guide are asking prices observed in September 2026 — Cycle Trader listings, forum sales, and published value guides. Asking isn't selling. Deduct 10–20% for the real market, and more for a bike with stories.

Chapter 1: Should You Even Buy a Shovelhead?

Let's get this out of the way first, because nobody else will say it straight.

A Shovelhead is not a practical motorcycle. It leaks. It vibrates. The charging system was marginal when it was new. Parts of the AMF era were assembled with the enthusiasm of a man working his last week. You will spend weekends fixing things that a modern bike never asks you to think about.

Here's why people buy them anyway: the Shovelhead is the last Harley Big Twin you can fully understand standing in your garage. No computers, no sensors, no dealer-only tools. Every problem it has is a problem a patient man with hand tools can solve. The aftermarket is the deepest of any vintage motorcycle on earth — you can build a complete Shovelhead from catalogs without a single factory part. And the sound, the shape, and the history are things no new bike can sell you.

Buy a Shovelhead if: you wrench, or you want to learn; you want a vintage Harley you can actually ride rather than trailer; you understand that purchase price is the down payment and maintenance is the mortgage.

Don't buy a Shovelhead if: you want reliable transportation; you can't do your own work and there's no good independent shop near you; you're stretching to afford the purchase price (you'll need that money again for the bike).

The Shovelhead vs. the Panhead vs. the Evo. Panheads (1948–1965) cost roughly double for comparable condition and every part is harder to find. Evos (1984–1999) are better motorcycles in every measurable way and cost less than Shovelheads — but they're not vintage in the way that matters to collectors, and their prices reflect it. The Shovelhead sits in the sweet spot: old enough to matter, supported enough to ride.

Chapter 2: What Changed, Year by Year (1966–1984)

The Shovelhead ran for nineteen model years. Harley changed something nearly every year. The changes that matter to a buyer fall into three groups: the motor itself, the running gear, and the models.

1966–1969: The Generator Shovel ("Early Shovel")

The 1966 Shovelhead was new heads on a familiar bottom end — aluminum "shovel" rocker boxes and heads on iron barrels, bolted to essentially a Panhead lower end with a generator. Collectors call these the Early Shovels. Factory ratings: 60 horsepower for the FLH, 54 for the FL.

SAMPLE EXCERPT — full guide available at the link on the cover sheet

What matters: these are the most collectible Shovelheads and the most expensive to buy. Only four years of them, first of the breed, and the generator setup is a known quantity with known fixes. Drums front and rear. The engine serial number — stamped on a pad on the left crankcase, format like **69FLH12345** — is the whole identity of the bike. There is no factory frame number on a 1966–1969. None. If a seller shows you a "matching" frame number on a '68, something's wrong (see Chapter 7).

1970: The Cone Motor

The bottom end was redesigned — the "cone" Shovelhead, named for the cone-shaped timing cover. The generator was gone, replaced by an alternator on the end of the crankshaft. Better charging, new cases, new headaches (early cone motors had their own teething issues). This is the dividing line collectors care about: generator bikes are the blue chips; cone bikes are the riders.

1971: The Super Glide and the Front Disc

Two big things. First, the FX Super Glide — Harley's first factory custom: FLH frame and 74-inch motor (no electric start), Sportster front end, foot pegs instead of floorboards, and that wild fiberglass boat-tail rear section. It flopped commercially — about 4,700 sold — which is exactly why a surviving 1971 FX with the boat-tail is worth real money today. The boat-tail was gone for 1972, replaced by a steel fender.

Second, the FL got a 10-inch front disc brake — factory model-year literature lists it as new for 1971, though a few popular histories round the date to 1972. (The FX didn't get its front disc until 1973.) Either way, the drum-brake era was ending.

Carburetors through this period: the early bikes ran Tillotson units — H-D Service Bulletin 564 (January 1968) documents Tillotson carbs on 1967-and-later Electra Glides, and '67 FLs are judged on Tillotsons at the 100-point level — then Bendix, with Bendix/Zenith from 1971 (listed as a first-year FL item in the factory model-year literature). The Keihin butterfly carb arrived in 1976 and ran to the end.

1972–1977: The Working Years

This is the heart of Shovelhead production — the bikes most buyers actually encounter.

- **1972:** The 10-inch front disc, new on the FL for 1971, was now standard FLH equipment. The FX settled into its steel-fender form and started selling.
- **1973:** Two milestones in one year. Factory model-year literature lists the kickstarter as deleted on the FL — electric start (standard since 1965) was now the only way to start a dresser — and lists rear hydraulic disc brakes as new on the FL, ending the rear-drum era. The FX was a different story: still kick-only since 1971, it got front and rear hydraulic discs this year too, and the electric-start FXE wouldn't arrive until 1974. On the FL, electric start was now the only assumption, which means the charging and starting systems matter more on these bikes.
- **1977:** The FXS Low Rider arrived — factory custom with a 2-into-1 exhaust, cast wheels, and drag bars. Hugely popular, and the start of Harley's long love affair with the "factory custom" idea.

Through these years the motor was the 74-inch (1200cc) cone Shovelhead, points ignition, four-speed transmission, chain primary and chain final drive. These are the honest working bikes of the line — and the cheapest way into a Shovelhead today.

1978–1979: The 80-Inch Motor

For 1978 the FL and FLH got the 1340cc (80-cubic-inch) Shovelhead — more torque, same architecture. The FX line didn't stay 74-inch for long: the FXS Low Rider and FXEF Fat Bob went 80-inch for 1979, the new FXWG Wide Glide and FXB Sturgis launched as 80-inch bikes for 1980, and the base FXE followed for 1981 — by 1981 the whole FX line was 1340cc. The bigger motor had its own teething issues (base gasket and head gasket weeping are the ones you'll hear about), but the 80-inch FLHs are the ones touring riders want.

SAMPLE EXCERPT — full guide available at the link on the cover sheet

Electronic ignition arrived as a mid-1978 running change — the Prestolite V-Fire I, standard through 1979 (points ran 1970 to early 1978; the Magnavox/Motorola V-Fire II followed for 1980–83, the V-Fire III for 1984–85). The rear disc brake, though, was older news on the FLH than most sellers think: factory model-year literature lists rear hydraulic discs as new on the FL for 1973. The 1978 models are also the first with the VIN label on the frame downtube (1978–1984).

1980–1981: Rubber Mounts and the Buyback

- **1980:** The FLT Tour Glide — rubber-mounted 80-inch Shovelhead, five-speed transmission, frame-mounted fairing. The first Harley that didn't shake the fillings out of your teeth. Also the FXB Sturgis: blacked-out, belt final drive (early '80s, 1980–82), a factory custom that previewed the '80s.
- **1981:** Two milestones. The 17-digit VIN arrived (federal mandate), which makes 1981+ bikes far easier to title and verify. And AMF sold Harley-Davidson back to a group of thirteen investors including Willie G. Davidson. The AMF era was over.

1982–1984: The Last Shovels

- **1982:** The FXR Super Glide II — new chassis, rubber-mounted Shovelhead, the best-handling Big Twin Harley had ever built. The FXR is the connoisseur's Shovelhead and prices are climbing.
- **1983:** The FLHS Electra Glide Sport — the last Electra Glide without a fairing, the direct ancestor of the Road King.
- **1984:** The end. The FXST Softail arrived with the new Evolution engine. The FXR went Evo. But the FLH and the remaining FX models (FXSB Low Rider, FXWG Wide Glide) carried the Shovelhead one last year — 1340cc across the board. A 1984 FLH or FXSB is the last of the line, and the market knows it.

A small run of 1985-titled Shovelheads genuinely exists — contract and police bikes built after regular production ended: Massachusetts and New Hampshire police orders plus a Mexico police order that was never delivered and sold on the open market, a bit over 200 machines titled as 1985s, mostly FLH/FLH80 police models. One documented 1985 FLH80 Police carries VIN 1HD1AHK13FY011895 (the "F" is the 1985 model-year code). Treat any "1985 Shovelhead" claim with respect but verify the numbers against factory records anyway — most are mis-titled 1984s or engine swaps.

Chapter 3: The AMF Years — An Honest Accounting

AMF (American Machine and Foundry) bought Harley-Davidson in 1969 and sold it back in 1981. Twelve years. Ask ten Harley guys about the AMF era and you'll get two religions: "AMF nearly killed Harley with garbage bikes" and "AMF saved Harley and the quality stories are overblown." Both are half true.

What AMF actually did wrong: They chased volume. Production ramped up fast, quality control didn't keep pace, and the bikes showed it — oil leaks from new, fasteners that needed checking, finish work that wasn't up to the old standard. The jokes wrote themselves: "the only thing that doesn't leak on a Harley is the rider." Some of that reputation was earned on the assembly line.

What AMF actually did right: They spent money. Real money — on the cone motor, on the Super Glide program, on the Low Rider, on the FLT rubber-mount development, on racing (the XR750 dominated dirt track through the entire AMF era). The company that emerged in the 1981 buyback had a modernized product line because AMF paid for the development.

What this means for you as a buyer: Judge the bike, not the era. A 1976 FXE that's been properly maintained for fifty years is not carrying 1976's assembly-line sins — every one of them has been fixed or the bike wouldn't still be here. Survivorship is the great quality filter: the bad ones died decades ago. What the AMF era does affect is *originality* — more of these bikes were modified, chopped, and parted out, so clean original AMF-era bikes are genuinely scarce. And the stigma itself is your friend: it keeps prices lower than the quality of the surviving bikes

SAMPLE EXCERPT — full guide available at the link on the cover sheet

justifies.

One more honest note: the pre-AMF worship goes too far the other way. A 1968 FLH was also an old motorcycle built by human beings. Buy condition and numbers, not mythology.

Chapter 4: The Model Decoder

Harley's model codes are a code, and sellers garble them constantly. Here's the Shovelhead lineup.

FL / FLH Electra Glide (1966–1984): The dresser. Full fenders, floorboards, windshield, bags, and from 1969 an optional batwing fairing (designed by Dean Wixom — removable, instruments stayed on the bars). FL is the base 74; FLH is the high-compression version. The touring bike, then and now. The 1978+ 80-inch FLHs are the ones to tour on.

FLT Tour Glide (1980–1984): Rubber-mounted 80-inch motor, five-speed, frame-mounted fairing. The future, arriving early. Rides better than any solid-mount Shovelhead. Shovelhead-powered FLTs (1980–83) are sleepers — all the comfort, none of the collector premium. Yet.

FLHS Electra Glide Sport (1979, 1983): The dresser without the fairing. The 1983 is the last of the breed and the direct ancestor of the Road King.

FLP: Police package. The Electra Glide police bikes are among the toughest Shovelheads built — maintained by fleets, ridden hard, serviced on schedule. A clean ex-police FLP is an honest bike at an honest price.

FX Super Glide (1971–1984): The factory custom. Started as FLH running gear with a Sportster front end (1971 boat-tail only), evolved through the FXE (electric start), FXEF Fat Bob, FXS Low Rider (1977+), FXB Sturgis (belt drive, early '80s), FXWG Wide Glide, FXSB Low Rider, and the FXR/FXRS (1982+, rubber-mounted, the rider's choice). The FX line is where the variety — and the confusion — lives. Decode the exact model from the VIN (Chapter 6), not the seller's ad.

What the codes mean in VIN position 1–2 (1970–1980): 1A = FL/FLP 1200 · 2A = FLH 1200 · 2C = FX 1200 · 9D = FXE 1200 · 2F = FXS 1200 · 5E = FXEF 1200 · 6E = FXEF 80 · 3G = FLH 80 · 5G = FLT 80 · 6G = FXE 80 · 7E = FLHS 1200. (Full table in Chapter 6.)

Chapter 5: VIN and Engine Numbers — Read These Before Anything Else

This chapter is the whole game. A Shovelhead with wrong, missing, or restamped numbers isn't a bargain — it's a legal problem you paid money to own. Learn the three eras.

1966–1969: The Engine Number Is the VIN

The serial number is stamped on a pad on the **left crankcase**, just above the timing hole plug. Format: two-digit year, model letters, then a 4- or 5-digit production sequence. Example: **69FLH12345** = 1969, FLH, unit 12345.

Three facts that matter:

1. **There is no factory frame number on a 1966–1969.** Harley didn't stamp them. If you see a frame number that "matches" on a generator Shovel, it was put there later — by an owner, a shop, or a licensing authority. That doesn't automatically make it stolen, but it makes the paperwork story something you must understand completely before money changes hands.
2. The frame does carry Harley's "additional original component identifying numbers" on the left side of the steering head — small stamps, not a VIN. Know they're there so a seller can't invent a story about them.
3. The numbers on the **bottom** of the cases — the "belly numbers" — are the machinist's matched-pair marks, not the serial. They decode as: first group = year machined + engine code (1 = 1200 Shovelhead, 14 = 1340 Shovelhead), then model year, then day of production, then the sequence number that day. Belly numbers tell

SAMPLE EXCERPT — full guide available at the link on the cover sheet

you when the cases were made. They have no legal standing and no direct relationship to the serial on the pad.

1970–1980: The 9-Digit VIN

Federal rules changed everything. The VIN is nine characters: **two-character model code + five-digit production sequence + two-character year code.** It's stamped on a pad on the **right crankcase** (to the right of the cone, viewed from the right side) and on a boss on the steering head. Engine and frame numbers match from the factory. From 1978, there's also a VIN label on the right front frame downtube.

Year codes: **H0 = 1970, H1 = 1971, H2 = 1972, H3 = 1973, H4 = 1974, H5 = 1975, H6 = 1976, H7 = 1977, H8 = 1978, H9 = 1979, J0 = 1980.** So **2A12345H7** is a 1977 FLH-1200, production sequence 12345. (The five-digit sequence counts all models built that year, not just your model — a high sequence number on a low-production model is normal.)

Common Shovelhead model codes: 1A (FL/FLP-1200), 2A (FLH-1200), 2C (FX-1200), 9D (FXE-1200), 2F (FXS-1200), 5E (FXEF-1200), 6E (FXEF-80), 3G (FLH-80), 5G (FLT-80), 6G (FXE-80), 7E (FLHS-1200).

1981–1984: The 17-Digit VIN

The modern format. The full 17-digit VIN is stamped on the frame steering head and printed on the VIN label. The engine carries an abbreviated 10-digit code (model code, model type, year, sequence). Tenth digit is the year: **B = 1981, C = 1982, D = 1983, E = 1984.** These are the easiest Shovelheads to verify and title — one more reason the late bikes are undervalued.

Spotting a Restamp

Restamped cases are the most expensive trap in Shovelheads. A restamp means someone ground the original number off and stamped a new one — usually to make a replacement engine match a title, sometimes to commit outright fraud. Here's what the factory stamps look like, per AMCA judging knowledge:

- The same number in the same font on the engine pad and the frame boss. The digits have distinctive shapes: the **4** is closed-top, straight, and triangular; **8**s are two stacked triangles; **1**s and **5**s are slanted (italic); **6**s and **9**s are odd, built from curved and straight segments; **2**s end with a little upward curl. Learn these shapes — restamps almost always use generic stamps that get the 4 and the 8 wrong.
- A clear five-pointed **star** punched at each end of the number.
- Nothing left the factory with an over-stamp — with one documented exception: Harley mis-stamped a run of engines (circa 1973) and factory re-stamped them with a line through the wrong number and the correct number below. This is real and documented — a '75 FXE bought new from a dealer carried exactly this. So a line-through restamp isn't automatically fraud, but it's automatically a bike that needs its story verified in writing.

Walk away when: the pad looks ground flat and re-stamped; the font is wrong; the stars are missing; the engine number doesn't match the frame on a 1970+ bike; the seller gets uncomfortable when you photograph the numbers. Photograph the numbers on every bike, every time, before you negotiate.

Chapter 6: "Numbers-Matching" — What It Actually Means on a Shovelhead

Sellers throw "numbers matching" around like it means one thing. On a Shovelhead it means three different things depending on the year, and the price difference between them is thousands of dollars.

1966–1969: There is only one number — the engine serial. "Numbers matching" here means the engine serial is original, unstamped-over, correct font, correct format for the year and model — and that the cases, heads, and major components are period-correct. There is no frame number to match. Anyone advertising "matching numbers" on a

SAMPLE EXCERPT — full guide available at the link on the cover sheet